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**Maynooth University**

**Special Topic Thesis**

**An exploration of Irish women's attitudes towards and experiences of the changing role of Catholicism within weddings and the social institution of marriage.**

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## **1.0 Introduction**

According to the most recent census records, in 2016 78.3% of the Irish population identified themselves as Roman Catholics ([www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)). For some, given the historical interwoven nature of the Irish state and the Catholic Church, this statistic is not surprising. Yet, when considered against the backdrop of an increasingly globalized society, the rise of individualism, and an intensification of the secularization debate, others do not accept this figure so readily. This thesis will offer a narrow yet in-depth examination of one aspect of religion in twenty-first century Irish society: an exploration of Irish women's attitudes towards and experiences of the changing role of Catholicism within weddings and the social institution of marriage. By drawing primarily on theories of secularization and modernization, and working with the concepts of “habitus” and life-cycle ritual theory among others, it will break down the macro-structures of religion and marriage and relate them to the micro-structures of women’s daily lives. My qualitative research question and methods enable this thesis to explore beneath the surface of the mammoth statistic mentioned above, and actually hear from Irish women, in their own words, how they experience Catholicism with regard to marriage; a seemingly pervading element of modern life despite the emergence of theories concerning its possible deinstitutionalization. In Ireland, marriage and wedding ceremonies appear to still be mainly experienced with an emphasis on religion. In 2015, 56.7% of wedding ceremonies were Catholic ones ([www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)).

This thesis will give an insight into contemporary attitudes towards the role of Catholicism within marriage. It will attempt to discover if Irish women still experience marriage as a religious sacrament or if the effects of secularization are becoming more and more evident within this social institution. It will also shed light on the consumerist culture associated with wedding ceremonies and how this affects the religiosity of getting married in contemporary Ireland. As a result of the wide age range of my research participants, there is a comparative aspect to this thesis, and themes and issues that arise within the research findings are examined with this in mind. This thesis does

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not seek to definitively answer specific research questions. Its purpose is to explore Irish women's attitudes and the meanings behind their actions, and to find out the ways in which this phenomenon affects their daily lives and individual realities.

## **2.0 Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Secularization and Modernization Theories**

Secularization is the main theoretical frame through which the social sciences have viewed the modern relationship between religion and society (Davie 2013:51). There are three levels at which secularization is examined in contemporary society: at a societal level, at an organizational level, and at an individual level. My research explores the individual level of secularization theory; people's individual choices, decisions, and actions that reflect patterns of religiosity in terms of their weddings and marriages. Davie (2013) and Zuckerman (2003) both lay down a good foundation in terms of the secularization debate. This debate is based around the idea that as societies become more modernized, they become less religious. The idea that society has evolved from a theological to a metaphysical stage, and the movement from supernatural to scientific modes of explanation is usually viewed in a positive light (Davie 2013:47). This idea is linked to the modernization of worldviews/ideologies, which is based on the belief that today, science and technology have a stronger hold over people than ever before, and work to diminish people's faith in religion. Although, in their respective writings, Davie and Zuckerman acknowledge the severity of the modernization process, they also argue that modernization is not necessarily damaging to religion, but has just changed the way in which we experience religion. Despite the prevalence of secularization and modernization theories, Davie argues that in general, religion is still a profoundly normal part of life for people in the modern world (2013:2).

There are two other main ways through which modernization theory can be analysed: modernization of social ties and modernization of economies. The former aspect relates to the fast-

paced nature of modern life in today's urbanized world. In terms of my research, an example of this is the efficiency of civil ceremonies and registry offices compared to Catholic wedding ceremonies. In the past, the Catholic Church had a monopoly on the provision of services within society. Today, there is an abundance of secular services, including an increasing amount of civil ceremony marriage venues such as hotels and golf courses. In terms of the latter aspect of modernization theory, there are more secular activities competing with the church, for instance, the rise of activities surrounding consumptive practices like shopping, as well as the need for people to work on Sundays.

## **2.2 Dimensions of Religious Belief and Practice**

Smart (1996) acknowledges various dimensions of religious belief and practice, two of which are quite relevant to my research questions. Firstly, the ritual/practical dimension involves activities such as worship, meditation, and pilgrimage (1996:10). My findings analyse the views of my research participants in terms of this dimension, in order to explore whether there is any correlation between engagement with Catholic practices and beliefs surrounding marriage.

Secondly, the material/artistic dimension is concerned with the material creations associated with religions such as churches and holy books (1996:11). This dimension is also significant for my research, as my findings attempt to shed light on the reasons behind why my research participants who do not practice Catholicism on a regular basis have had and are planning to have Catholic wedding ceremonies in churches.

## **2.3 Catholic Habitus**

According to Bourdieu, "habitus" is a system that organises people's ability to act that eventually becomes embodied in their taste, for instance, their choice of clothing, the food they eat, and the activities they engage in (Share et al 2012:385). Habitus is established through socialization into a certain way of life, therefore, Bourdieu argues that people's lifestyles are "systematic products of

habitus” (Paterson 2006:44). Bourdieu discusses habitus with an emphasis on consumption, but Inglis (2007) draws on this concept and appropriates it in a unique way to Catholicism within Irish society. The associative nature between being Irish and being Catholic is phenomenal, and is discussed from a historical perspective in section 3.2 of the thesis.

Many Irish people’s identification with Catholicism is by no means a reflexive process. It is, at times, taken for granted and viewed as completely natural. Most Irish people are still born into the Catholic Church through baptism and socialization into the church’s beliefs and practices (Inglis 2007:2). For young Irish children, almost all of this socialization occurs within the family and throughout their time at primary school. Inglis argues that this leads to the development of a Catholic habitus; “a deeply embodied, almost automatic way of being spiritual and moral that becomes second nature and creates a Catholic sense of self and way of behaving and interpreting the world” (2007:2). Although as adults, some Irish people may not be fully engaged with the Catholic faith, as a result of their socialization, they still regard themselves as belonging to an Irish Catholic heritage (Inglis 2007:2).

#### **2.4 Lifecycle Ritual Theory**

According to McGarry, the high levels of participation in Catholic family and community events like baptisms, Holy Communions, weddings, and funerals are indicative of an “a la carte” approach to Catholicism in which people pick and choose what religious rituals and practices suit their daily lives (2006:28). This is not only linked to modernization of social ties theory, but also to the concept of “believing without belonging” coined by Davie (1990). This term refers to people’s high levels of religious belief that are not translated into practice.

Another way of approaching lifecycle ritual theory is mentioned by Inglis who states that engagement in Catholic events like the ones above fit into a culture dominated by consumption (2007:3). Lifecycle rituals are quite often intertwined with consumptive practices. For instance, on

a child's First Holy Communion, new clothes are usually bought for not only the child making their communion, but also their parents and siblings. Many children receive money and gifts, and there is usually some kind of party or celebration after the mass. Rojek also explores this idea, presenting evidence that religion is being partially replaced in people's daily lives with modern phenomena such as consumption and preoccupation with the concept of celebrity (2012:120). The relationship between weddings and consumption is explored in section 3.6 of the thesis.

### **3.0 Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Both religion and marriage are two widely researched topics, but I am specifically interested in the role of religion within the social institution of marriage and wedding ceremonies in contemporary Irish society. It is important that this issue is contextualized, therefore, in order to situate this thesis in terms of wider sociological study, this literature review will give a brief description of the significance of the Catholic Church within Irish society throughout the twentieth century. A mention of research concerning the varying levels of belief and practice of men and women will provide context to the gender dimension of this thesis. Although these two sections of the literature review are not substantial, they are important to consider when it comes to my specific research question as this thesis explicitly focuses on the opinions and experiences of Irish women only. Attention will be paid to the Catholic Church's view of marriage, as well as studies on changing perspectives and meanings of marriage. Drawing on research within the sociology of consumption, this literature review will examine the link between weddings and consumption. Throughout it, I will state how my own research findings have the potential to add to the existing literature on various dimensions of this topic.

### **3.2 Irish Society and Catholicism**

Sociohistorical context is extremely important to consider when it comes to analysing social phenomena as all aspects of people's individual, micro lives are linked to larger, macro social structures. Where one is born has a huge influence on one's identity, including one's religious identity.

In the past, the terms "Irish" and "Catholic" were inextricably linked and used interchangeably, whereas now, it is not uncommon for some Irish people to feel embarrassed to admit that they are Catholic (McGarry 2006:27). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Catholicism became a defining element of Irish national identity (White 2006:238). In the construction of the 1937 Constitution, President Eamon de Valera was counselled by a large group of prominent Catholic figures ([www.historyireland.com](http://www.historyireland.com)), whose influences are extremely evident within the Constitution, for example, in article forty-one, where it is stated that "The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack" ([www.constitution.ie](http://www.constitution.ie)). This proclamation is closely aligned to the views of the Catholic Church where marriage is concerned, as discussed in section 3.4 of the thesis.

According to Smith, the Irish state and the church acted as "guardians of the nation's moral climate" (2007:2). One of the most prominent religious scandals in recent Irish history linked to marriage is concerned with unmarried mothers and their "illegitimate children", who were seen as a threat to the institution of marriage as sexual relations were deemed deviant unless "explicitly procreative and within the bounds of marriage" (O'Sullivan and O'Donnell 2012:266). Unmarried pregnant women were faced with exile and shame was projected upon them. Many had little choice but to enter various institutions of containment that were controlled by the Catholic Church, and face forced separation from their children who were either adopted, fostered, or



institutionalized (O'Sullivan and O'Donnell 2012:266). The process of decline that the Church has been going through in Ireland since the mid-1990s has been influenced by such scandals, as well as by the lack of legitimacy and accountability of the church that the proliferation of these scandals indicate (Halikiopoulou 2011:5).

There is an abundance of literature to be found on the prevalence of Catholicism within Irish society. Much of this literature, such as the examples of work from *Irish and Catholic? Towards an Understanding of Identity* (2006) takes a historical perspective. Detailed information on the church's impact on Irish law, education, and family life is widely available, and the more obscure elements of the church's influence in Irish society, like the church sexual abuse and Mother and Baby Homes scandals, are becoming the focus of contemporary research. O'Sullivan and McDonnell (2012), Smith (2007), and Smyth (1993) offer pieces of key sociological research in the area of religious morality and stigma towards unmarried mothers.

### **3.3 Gender and Catholicism**

There is a common belief within the sociology of religion that in terms of belief and practice in the Christian west, women are more religious than men. Women attend church more regularly than men, and are associated with higher levels of religiosity (Cassese and Holman 2016:514).

According to Davie, this is one of the most pervasive findings outlined in the literature of this discipline (2013:238). In the nineteenth century, religion was pushed into the private realm, assuming the role of guardian of the traditional domestic sphere and the values that accompany it (Haynes 2005:385). Women, rather than men, were, and to an extent, still are associated with this sphere. A century later in Ireland, those former trends were still visible. Catholicism became a hallmark of Irish identity, and the state introduced legislation to support this. This legislation required women to conform to a national ideal, one in which they were portrayed in purely domestic terms. The sociological relationship between gender and religion is one that has been

thoroughly researched. In the case of Ireland, Inglis (2007) makes some extremely interesting observations in terms of elderly women and Catholicism.

Stating that the religiosity of Ireland is mainly fuelled by elderly Catholic women, Inglis suggests that these women are usually deeply embedded within a Catholic habitus. He argues that this habitus is a form of ascribed social identity in which elderly women today have little choice in (2007:7-8). Mothers played a key role in passing on the Catholic faith to the rest of the family, and in turn, keeping Ireland as Catholic as it has been for so long (Inglis 2007:9). Yet, Inglis does not make assumptions about Irish women as a completely homogenous group of Orthodox Catholics, and suggests that the decline in the number of “detached” orthodox Catholics is linked to women who abandoned the image of and expectation to be a traditional Catholic Irish mother during the twentieth century (2007:9).

### **3.4 Marriage and Catholicism**

The Catholic Church’s moral teachings explicitly encourage marriage and deem it as an essential sacrament. The Catechism ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)) outlines the precursors needed in order to engage in the sacrament of marriage, as well as the expectations of how individuals should behave throughout their marriage. Marriage is viewed as a life-long union between a man and a woman, who are, preferably, both baptized. Once married, engagement in sexual intercourse is expected, and procreation is highly endorsed ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)).

Vignoli and Salvini suggest that the common tendency of people to marry does not only lie with the explicit teachings of the church, but that religion also influences people’s decisions around marriage and other family practices in more obscure ways. They offer two other perspectives from which the relationship between religion and marriage can be analysed: social pressure and tradition (Vignoli and Salvini 2014:1081). It is not uncommon for people to experience pressure to marry at a societal level. People may try to conform to behaviour that is

seen as socially acceptable in order to receive approval from family, friends and neighbours. A lot of the time, the outlook on what behaviour is and is not deemed acceptable is based on Catholic teachings. An example of this is the decision to marry rather than cohabit (Vignoli and Salvini 2014:1083). Engaging in sexual relations before marriage is seen as extremely negatively within the Catholic faith, and because of this, cohabitation is not favoured by the church. These views penetrate the views of entire societies, although this varies across space and time. In southern Europe, for example, traditional family practices are extremely common and cohabitation is accepted less than in other Western countries (2014:1083), such as Ireland. Even if an individual is not a member of the Catholic faith, they may still feel obliged to marry rather than cohabit as a result of pressure from family, friends, and neighbours, who were themselves, perhaps, influenced by religious beliefs.

For some, religion is drawn upon “merely as a form of social identity” (Vignoli and Salvini 2014:1084). Customs, habits, and rituals associated with Catholicism, like marrying in a church, act as a continuation of tradition for people. They do not come about as a result of deep religious belief, but only through a desire to identify with some kind of traditional way of life (Vignoli and Salvini 2014:1084). Inglis draws upon the idea of tradition, stating that adherence to church teachings, rules, and regulations was, arguably, more about belonging to a national cultural tradition and heritage than actually having unquestionable belief and faith in Catholicism (Inglis 2007:3).

The argument for marriage as the dependent variable in the religion/marriage relationship is a pervading one, but it is important that the opposite is also acknowledged. Family practices can have a result on religious affiliation. The changes of the second demographic transition such as falling fertility rates and rising divorce have an impact on people’s view of the nature of religious authority (Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992:629). Lawler argues that people who identify as Catholics are depending less on the teachings of the church when it comes to making moral

decisions about their lives, including decisions made around marriage and divorce. According to Lawler, sixty-five percent of American Catholics believe that they can be “good” Catholics even if they do not adhere to the Catholic Church’s teachings on marriage and divorce. In America, Catholics also divorce at the same rate as non-Catholics (Lawler 2002: ix), despite the Catholic Church’s non-recognition of divorce ([www.foryourmarriage.org](http://www.foryourmarriage.org)). Despite the vast field of sociology of religion, there appears to be a lack of studies that focus on women’s views of the effects of Catholic teachings and values in their own marriages. My research will pay attention to this topic by closely examining whether the values expressed in Catholic teachings are reflected in women’s own marriages. There is significant research available on macro-structures, especially major population trends, and variables like the rates of births outside marriage, fertility, same-sex marriage, divorce, and cohabitation appear in much existing research.

### **3.5 The Meaning of Marriage**

Cherlin’s argument for the deinstitutionalization of marriage is one that is to the fore of debates around experiences of marriage in contemporary life. Cherlin defines “deinstitutionalization” as the “weakening of the social norms that define people’s behaviour” (Cherlin 2004:848). Marriage does not hold the same significance for people as it did during the first half of the twentieth century. The rise of divorce, births outside of marriage, and remarriage suggest this. In Ireland, following the enactment of the 1937 Constitution, divorce was not legalised until 1996. Yet shifting beliefs and values began to be spotted some decades before the legislation changed. From the 1970s, people began to postpone marriage, and opted instead for cohabitation (Kiernan 2001:1). This indicates a separation of sexual relations from marriage. This transition is believed to have been primarily driven by the growth of individualism by which people become less concerned with collective values endorsed by society, and begin to prioritize themselves and their own needs (Cherlin 2004:851). This ideology marks the transition from Burgess’ idea of the companionship family in which there is an emphasis on common interests, democracy, and

consensus (Burgess 1948:418) to what Cherlin terms the “individualized marriage”, in which self-development, flexibility, and communication are favoured (2004:852). Marriage is still something that people aspire to as the “capstone” of adult life. Cherlin identifies marriage as a form of social bragging among women (2004:855). It symbolizes a significant milestone in one’s adult life, and is a much sought after personal achievement concerning the quality of a relationship (Cherlin 2004:856). Cherlin’s work is quite comprehensive, but there is a lack of research to be found regarding how women define marriage and what significance it holds for them. My research will offer a discussion of these questions.

### **3.6 Weddings and Consumption**

There is quite a lot of literature available on the topic of weddings and consumptive practices. A useful way of categorizing aspects of this vast topic is through the application of Bourdieu’s concept of “capital”. By applying the concepts of economic, social, and cultural capital to the ideologies behind various consumptive practices, one is able to attempt to analyse women’s experiences of this phenomenon. Paterson draws on Bourdieu’s concepts, stating that one’s lifestyle is not simply the result of a high or low income, but that it also emerges as a result of socialization into a particular habitus (2006:44). Cherlin’s view of marriage as a social achievement envied by many is also relevant here, because the actual wedding itself can play a major role. According to Cherlin, the decision to marry is usually accompanied by the ability to throw “a nice wedding party” (2004:855). Weddings have also become status symbols, emanating economic, social and cultural capital (Carter and Duncan 2016).

Although one of the main discourses around consumption and weddings focuses on the wedding industry and its emphasis on the essential purchase of various goods and services, Carter and Duncan state that many of their research participants actually distanced themselves from this and refused to participate in “empty consumerism” (2016). This disputes the claims of other research with regard to the influence of the wedding industry such as the work of Boden, in which

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it is suggested that weddings are commodities and brides are the consumer identities who purchase them (2003:2). Despite the view that claims like Boden's may be an overgeneralization, there is no denying that weddings are a huge part of social life and the wedding industry is extremely prevalent in television, movies, magazines, and on social media (Otnes and Pleck 2003:1). Although there may be competition between women to see whose wedding is more extravagant, "lavish weddings" that last more than a day are often considered to be extremely wasteful and representative of engagement in a sort of binge (Otnes and Pleck 2003:3). Like Cherlin (2004), Otnes and Pleck argue that the luxurious consumption of the bride and groom is often accompanied by an expanding guest list so that more and more people can witness and revel in it (2003:10).

Carter and Duncan's (2016) recent research is a valuable source within this area of sociology. They discuss themes and issues that correspond with elements of my findings chapter, especially their view that brides attempt to create their own unique special day as well as adhere to various wedding traditions. Traditional elements legitimate the wedding as a conventional rite of passage. Interestingly, Carter and Duncan examine this from a same-sex marriage perspective, stating that traditional elements like the wearing of a white dress are more likely to be scrutinized and less acceptable for lesbian couples (2016). There is limited research available on the topic of gay and lesbian weddings, particularly in the Irish case as many researchers examine marriage and weddings from a heteronormative viewpoint. My findings will add to research that is centred upon gay and lesbian couples, as it includes the opinions and experiences of a queer woman.

## **4.0 Methods**

### **4.1 Research Design and Approach**

I began the research process by developing a research question and then choosing the type of research that I would conduct based on the nature of this question. I chose to use a qualitative

method because of the rich and detailed data that it has the potential to provide. Qualitative methods focus on how individuals and groups understand and view their social worlds and the experiences that they have within them. According to Silverman qualitative methods function at the level of words; they rely on verbal descriptions of real-life situations and occurrences (2011:4). This research project is specifically based on face-to-face, semi-structured qualitative interviewing. Rather than making use of a deductive research method, I chose to carry out inductive research, whereby the researcher begins by collecting data, and then develops a theory following the analysis of this data (O'Leary 2011:121). This was a significant part of my research approach as I was not setting out to prove or disprove anything about the social world, but I wanted to see where my respondents' views and opinions would take me, and to develop a discussion from there.

My ontological and epistemological positions also informed my choice of research. My ontological position is constructivist. I do not believe that there is one objective reality external to us. I believe that we, through our day-to-day activities and interactions, construct our own realities and have the ability to change them. My epistemological position is interpretivist. I think that knowledge about the social world is to be gained through talking to people and observing them in their natural setting. Qualitative methods support this paradigm as they allow the researcher to extract data from people's own interpretations of their social situations. Interpretivists believe that the goal of research is to understand what meanings people give to reality, not to determine how reality works outside of these perspectives and interpretations (Chambliss and Schutt 2016:200).

#### **4.2 Research Questions**

This thesis is an exploration of Irish women's attitudes towards and experiences of the changing role of Catholicism within weddings and the social institution of marriage. Some of my sub-questions are as follows: Why are growing numbers of Catholic women deciding to have civil ceremonies in registry offices? Why are women marrying in churches yet not taking part in any

other Catholic practices? Do the commodified aspects of a wedding overshadow the religious?

How important are the church's teachings on marriage during the actual marriage itself?

I wanted to keep my research question narrow yet interesting. I chose to study women rather than men due to the belief that women are more religious than men (Cassese and Holman 2016:514), and because of the female-oriented nature of the commercial wedding market (Carter and Duncan 2016). I chose specifically to research Irish women because of the fascinating linkage between being Irish and being Catholic. This also justifies my decision to focus purely on Catholicism. Weddings are an aspect of modern life that have always intrigued me. Since I was a child, I was drawn to the aesthetics and commercialisation of weddings. Yet, I always believed that religion played a key role too. As a sociologist, I began to critically examine commonsensical judgements that I once made, and these newfound critical outlooks led me to my research question.

### **4.3 Interviews**

My chosen method is a flexible one that allows the researcher to gain responses to questions they have prepared, as well as reactions to broader themes they wish to converse about. Unlike structured interviews, when a researcher is preparing for a semi-structured interview they understand that there is a possibility that topics they had not considered may arise during the interview, and the order will, perhaps, decide itself as the conversation goes on (Browne 2011:64). Despite this, an initial list of questions and themes helped me to stay on track and gather information that sheds light on my research questions. My interviews provided me with rich, detailed, in-depth data. This was not only verbal data but other things like laughter, sighs, and hesitation. My interviews were all quite casual because I had already established rapport with my interviewees before the actual interview itself. This is discussed further in section 4.4 of the thesis. My interview schedule was divided into three main parts: religious beliefs and practice, views on Catholicism and marriage, and views on wedding ceremonies (please see Appendix A).



**4.4 Participants****Table A:**

Participants	Age	Sexual Orientation	Religion	Marital Status	Occupation	County of residence
Sarah	19	Heterosexual	No religion	Single	Student	Dublin
Ann	49	Heterosexual	Catholic	Engaged	Unemployed	Dublin
Rachel	21	Heterosexual	Catholic	Single	Student	Kildare
Eithne	56	Heterosexual	Christian	Married	Civil servant	Dublin
Nora	34	Heterosexual	No religion	Married	Receptionist	Dublin
Ash	22	Queer	No religion	Single	Waitress	Dublin
Carol	33	Heterosexual	Catholic	Engaged	Security Officer	Meath
Lily	39	Heterosexual	Catholic	Married	Receptionist	Dublin

I chose my eight respondents using purposive sampling. My sample size is quite small and all of my participants live in either Dublin, Kildare, or Meath, therefore, the data I collected cannot be deemed generalizable or reliable. Despite this, my qualitative research enabled me to collect data high in validity.

Initiating contact with my participants was quite straightforward. I approached five of the women who I knew well face-to-face and explained my research project to them and we arranged a date for the interview. I initiated contact with the other three women, who I knew as acquaintances through Facebook, where they were on my friends list. I explained my project through this medium, and our first face-to-face meeting was the interview itself. I was not refused by any of the women that I approached for an interview. All of the interviews were either located in my own home or the participant's home.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

The form of coding that I made use of is colour-coding based on thematic analysis. I recorded the interviews using my mobile phone and then transcribed each one. I printed out the transcripts and read through them, noting any major themes I saw emerge. Then, using highlighters, I matched a particular colour with a particular theme, and colour-coded the transcripts. I then re-read the transcripts, looking for any sub-themes. Only one of my participants, Carol, declined to be recorded. Instead of recording and then transcribing, I attempted to transcribe her responses during the actual interview and immediately after it. As a result of feasibility, I was only able to transcribe responses that were especially relevant to my specific research questions. Before I began coding the data, I had some initial themes in mind that were informed by my theoretical framework and literature review; these were expanded upon during the process. I then chose specific quotations that would strengthen and justify my argument.

#### **4.6 Reflexivity**

Becker argues that the qualitative researcher must recognise that they are inseparable from the research process, as they cannot “insulate” themselves from the data (1996:3). Because of this, it is essential that the researcher engages in a process of reflexivity (Watt 2007:82). My own ontological and epistemological positions affected my research design, research approach, and data collection. This is outlined in sections 4.1 and 4.2 of the thesis. As well as this, throughout the research process, I acknowledged that my own religious beliefs and personal identity also affected my research questions. For example, my decision to include a queer women in my sample was out of a personal interest in gender studies and a desire to hear a non-heteronormative opinion on the relationship between marriage and Catholicism. Despite this, I attempted to remain as objective as possible throughout the interviews themselves and the process of data analysis, in order to avoid interviewer bias.

#### **4.7 Ethics**

All of my participants were above the age of eighteen and were all issued with a consent form (please see Appendix B) outlining the aim of my research and their role in it. I also verbally communicated this to them, stating that they have a right to confidentiality and anonymity, and that they would be provided with a pseudo name. Several of my participants told me that they would prefer if I used their own name in the thesis. I also informed the participants of the limits to confidentiality, stating that if asked, I would have to supply consent forms and interview transcripts to my special topic supervisor. When interviewing the woman who identifies as queer, I asked her what term she would prefer me to use in relation to her sexuality. My participants were aware that despite initial informed consent, the process would be ongoing and negotiated, and that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Seven of my participants agreed to let me record our conversation, and were told that they could have a copy of it if they desired, as well as a copy of the final thesis when completed.

## **5.0 FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This section of the thesis will discuss the main findings relating to my research question that arose from my primary research. I will begin by giving a brief overview of the religious beliefs of my participants and the religious practices that they engage in. I will then determine whether there is any correlation between the women's levels of religiosity and their opinions concerning the Catholic Church's role in the social institution of marriage. Discussions around the meaning of marriage surface, along with an interesting dichotomy between women's individual views and the perseverance of traditional romantic love and newly-found societal expectations. The discussion will then turn to wedding ceremonies, both religious and secular. This section will then conclude with an examination of weddings and consumptive practices. Many of the themes and concepts

that arise in this section can be related back to my theoretical framework and literature review. It is important to note that this section of my thesis does not seek to answer a specific question, but instead, offers an exploration of women's experiences and attitudes towards the role of Catholicism within weddings and the social institution of marriage.

### **5.2 Levels of Religiosity**

(See table A in section 4.4 for a breakdown of what religion the respondents identified with). The extent of religious practice that my Christian and Catholic respondents engaged in was, overall, quite low. Although each of these respondents were asked if they would describe themselves as a religious individual, Carol was the only woman who responded with an affirmation:

Interviewer: Would you describe yourself as a religious individual?

Carol: Yes. Before my Grandad and Nanny died people believed that you had to go to church and say your prayers every day and night and get confession once a month if not every week. I believe that we are all God's children. He made us, he never said we had to go to mass to believe in him or be holy. I pray to God and ask him for my health, my mind, my body and soul and for my family and loved ones. If I need help I pray to Jesus himself and I feel his love when my prayers are answered.

Carol was also the only respondent who spoke using highly religious vocabulary. Throughout her interview she used terms like "God's children" and the names "Mary", "Joseph", and "Jesus".

Unlike Carol, my other Christian and Catholic respondents answered quite vaguely and ambiguously when questioned about their religious beliefs:

Ann: Well...I still believe in certain things like emm...not things that I believed in years ago but I still believe in certain things I think just cause it makes ya, sometimes it's like a comfort thing.

Overall, Carol's regular attendance at mass, especially for significant events in the Christian calendar such as Christmas Day and Easter Sunday, demonstrates that she exhibits the highest levels of religiosity of all respondents. While speaking about attending mass, Carol mentioned that sometimes "a day's work interrupts". This is evidence of secularization at an individual level and modernization of economies theory, whereby in the modern world, people are increasingly engaging in other activities on Sundays rather than going to religious services.

Rachel was the only Catholic respondent who said she did not engage in any Catholic practices at all, including prayer. While Eithne and Ann do engage in prayer, neither of them attend mass except for lifecycle rituals such as baptisms, holy communions, confirmations, and weddings. This is indicative of the "a la carte" approach to religious practice as coined by McGarry, whereby many Irish Catholics choose to practice Catholicism only when it suits what is going on in the rest of their lives (2006:28). All the women, even those who have no religious beliefs, attend mass for events like those mentioned above. Yet Ash and Nora, two of my respondents who identified as having no religion, both said that they do not actively participate in the ceremonies or masses. The following quotation from Sarah exhibits just how taken for granted and unquestioned baptism, Holy Communion, and confirmation can be in children's lives:

Sarah: Well I was baptised and then I went to primary school and made me communion and all throughout primary school em we were like taught religion and then I made me confirmation and I obviously went to mass and that.

Her use of the word "obviously" indicates that she regards these Catholic lifecycle rituals as completely normal. For many, this unreflective mind-set continues into their adult lives. This is an example of what Inglis termed "Catholic habitus" (2007:2). The quotation from Ann below demonstrates the lasting effects that childhood socialization can have on an individual.

Ann: I suppose I still believe like or I still feel Catholic because that's how I was brought up.

Ann's socialization into the Catholic faith still seems to be of significance to her as a marker of identity even though she does not practice Catholicism anymore. When she was asked why she decided to baptise her children, she responded saying:

Ann: I was brought up like as a Catholic and then when I had the kids that's how I decided to bring them up. So that's why they were baptised, communion, confirmation, mass every week. For years.

### **5.3 Marriage and Catholic Teachings**

Despite the identification of five of my participants with Christianity and Catholicism, not one of them expressed an affiliation with the Catholic Church's teachings around the topic of marriage. This does not seem as surprising when the participants' levels of religiosity, discussed above, are considered. The increasingly out-dated and old-fashioned nature of church teachings and their failure to reflect what is happening in modern society was expressed by many of the participants as a reason why church teachings are being ignored when it comes to how people "do" marriage. In general, there does not seem to be any correlation between the religious identification of my participants and their views on the Catholic Church's teachings on various aspects of marriage. This finding can perhaps be analysed through a reversal of Davie's concept of "believing without belonging" (1990). Although the participants who identify as Catholic feel a sense of inclusion and belonging within the Catholic Church and attend mass on certain occasions, they fail to believe in the core teachings of the church. They belong yet do not believe in some of the central tenets of this institution.

### **5.3.A Prohibition of Divorce**

Carol was the only participant who gave any indication of agreement with the Catholic Church's prohibition of divorce, but then acknowledged that she agreed with divorce in some cases.

Carol: I don't believe in divorce and a couple shouldn't rush marriage. But times are changing let the priest divorce couples who can't stand each other. It's not healthy to live together.

Interviewer: So do you believe in divorce in some cases?

Carol: Well feelings change, some families have violence and drug abuse.

Given Carol's strong identification with the Catholic Church, as discussed in section 5.2, her contradictory views, as opposed to the clear-cut opinions of the other participants, is not surprising. The unrealistic nature of the Catholic Church's advocacy of marriage as a fixed life-long union was expressed by Eithne:

Eithne: Emm I think the idea of marriage as a life-long union is a very good concept em...it's difficult and I don't know if it's realistic for everybody but it's certainly something worth aiming for and I think humans generally are monogamous.

Like Eithne, all the women who were either married or engaged expressed the desire for their marriages to last a life-time. Yet, their openness to the idea of divorce suggests that they are not experiencing marriage purely as a religious sacrament. Instead, there is evidence that personal health and happiness is increasingly being valued more than the maintenance of a marriage. When Nora was asked if the vows spoken at Catholic wedding ceremonies are too idealistic, she answered in the affirmative.

Interviewer: So in terms of religious wedding ceremonies and the Catholic vows spoken at them, do you think they're too idealistic?

Nora: Yeah. They are. Through sickness and health. Like...if someone, like I only know it from my parents. My dad was clinically depressed and my mother and

myself and my brothers lived with that. And there's only so much you can cope so they separated and that was in our best interests, in the best interests of the family like only God knows what way we would've ended up if it had have continued on. But no it just, the vows are just, you should just vow to be together for, just be together. Best way to put it.

### **5.3.B Same-sex marriage**

All the participants, whether they identified as religious individuals or not, were in complete disagreement with the Catholic Church's prohibition of same-sex marriage, deeming it as "Bullshit!" (Rachel) and "ridiculous" (Ash). Some of the popular discourse used in the "Yes" side of the Irish marriage referendum campaign in 2015 was drawn upon, for example, the arguments that the availability of same-sex marriage is not hurting anyone, that everybody is the same despite gender, and that it does not matter whether a woman loves a woman or a man loves a man.

### **5.3.C Procreation and Sexual Relations Before Marriage**

All the participants expressed the belief that having children was non-essential to a marriage, but Rachel, one of the youngest participants, stated her desire to procreate within the bounds of marriage in the future. Rachel's decision to wait until marriage to engage in sexual relations did not lie with religious beliefs at all, but instead, was a much more personal decision.

Interviewer: And is your choice to not have children til you're married, does that have anything to do with religion?

Rachel: No I think it's more personal. I think I'd like to just because my parents weren't, I think I would like to be married and have children. I don't know if it's because of like the security of it...but I just think I'd wait til I got married.

Rather than criticizing the church, Eithne offered a positive way of interpreting this teaching. Ash also commented on this positive aspect.



Eithne: I think a lot of people want to go on and have a family and marriage is kind of the traditional structure in which children are protected legally and in society.

It is most interesting that Rachel and Ash, two of the youngest women, mentioned the potential security that marriage offers for a family despite having no personal experience with this institution. This indicates that young people's consideration of marriage in the future is being partially influenced by the legal and practical benefits that marriage offers, rather than for religious reasons.

Discussions of recent church scandals particularly concerning the treatment of unmarried mothers and their children in Irish society arose when I was conversing with the participants about pre-marital sexual relations:

Interviewer: So the church has a long history of negative treatment towards women who became pregnant before they're married as we know especially recently. How do you feel about the church's idea of prohibition of sexual relations before marriage?

Nora: It's disgusting. It is disgusting how they, they advocate ya know no sex before marriage and ya know you can't do that and just from events in recent days, it's all about the unborn child which is ok but yet what they did to all those kids from newborn to three years of age, no its actually, it's very upsetting to think about. It's just, the church is just, I think it's time that they, I think it's time Ireland separated church and state and the church really did take a hundred steps out of this country at this point.

This supports the argument that scandals associated with the Catholic Church have fed into modern perceptions of this institution, resulting, for some, in a complete distrust of anything to do with it (Halikiopoulou 2011:5). During our interview, Carol spoke about her "mixed feelings about priests" because of the abuse that her Grandfather suffered as a child in a Christian Brothers' Industrial School in Artane, County Dublin.

## **5.4 The Meaning of Marriage**

Marriage is still an important social institution for the women I interviewed. Even for the women neither married nor engaged, there is still a desire to marry or at least a consideration of marriage as an institution that they will perhaps engage with in the future. Many of the older participants who were either engaged or already married seemed to find it difficult to define what marriage meant for them, giving quite ambiguous explanations, noting that “it’s hard to explain” (Ann) and “I don’t know how to describe it” (Nora). Being able to successfully define marriage and what it means for one personally was an elusive task for most of my participants.

### **5.4.A The Individualized Marriage**

The emphasis on the changeable and fluid nature of people’s relationships was one that was recurrent throughout all the interviews, and was one of the most striking findings within the data collected, especially from the three youngest participants. When asked about what marriage means to them, they spoke of this social institution with a huge emphasis on personal happiness, and stressed that people change and evolve, and therefore, a certain marriage may not and does not have to last an entire lifetime. This aligns with Cherlin’s concept of the “individualized marriage” (2004:852) and a move away from Burgess’ “companionship family” (1948:418).

Ash: I’d like to think I could fall in love with someone and know that I’d love them for the rest of my life but I don’t feel that certainty so I, and I wouldn’t feel, well I’d obviously feel bad if someone fell out of love with me but I wouldn’t hold it against them because I myself don’t believe I could love someone forever and ever and that love wouldn’t change. So that idea of someone marrying someone and that being it and then like them not being able to step out of that arrangement kinda seems really intense to me.

The issue of abusive relationships arose on several occasions.

Sarah: Well I think like if you’re gonna get married like the reason people get married is cause they say they’re gonna spend the rest of their life together. But I obviously think like if you get married and you’re not happy with that person like you can make the decision to leave. It’s not like this like you’re signing your life

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away to the person so you're like aw I have to stay with them even if they're like abusing me or like I'm not happy with them if you wanna leave you can.

Lily: I don't agree with the church's prohibition of divorce. Everyone should have the right to divorce if deemed necessary, especially people in abusive relationships.

The above quotations further enhance the argument that people are putting their own health and happiness before that of their marriage. Despite the emphasis on the individual, this quotation from Lily stresses that Burgess' "companionship marriage" (1948:418) has not been completely diminished:

Lily: It's not always easy and sometimes every day is a test but if you get through the bad times it's so worth it.

#### **5.4.B Romantic Love**

According to Cherlin, young women often still see marriage in romantic terms; prioritizing sexual intimacy, fidelity, and romantic love (2004:856). My data produced evidence that supported this claim. Ash emphasized the importance of loving and protecting your partner, stating that:

Ash: In my eyes marriage is you want to protect someone as much as possible like you love them so much that you wanna go above and beyond to protect them as much as possible and love them to the best of your ability.

Carol's view of marriage was the most traditional and gendered out of all the participants. Her romanticizing of a hard-working harmonious family with the husband as the breadwinner providing instrumental support and the mother as the homemaker can be compared to that of the Functionalist theorist Talcott Parsons whose work has been heavily criticized by Marxist and Feminist sociologists in recent decades.

Carol: I think it is beautiful knowing you have a loved one with you til you die. Supporting each other, making a family, a beautiful home. Working hard to keep the food and water on the table, feeling loved and safe and supported. Knowing that your husband will support the family until the wife is ready to get back out to work. It's having a good life with good memories growing old together with a good pension (laughs).

#### **5.4.C Societal Expectation**

One of the most interesting findings that arose in terms of societal pressure and marriage is the increasing expectation of marriage being put on homosexual couples within the LGBTQ community since the Marriage Act 2015 came into law. Ash, the only homosexual respondent, speaks of this pressure in negative terms.

Ash: I feel like there's a bit of pressure now that the marriage referendum has passed that em there's pressure to get married and I'd be afraid to rush into it. And a lot of queer people em are against marriage because it's always been this thing we weren't allowed have so it's just like oh we don't need it. Like I'm currently seeing someone that em they, they don't wanna ever get married and I don't know how I feel about that yet.

Ash's views echo research conducted by Baumle and Compton who argue that many homosexual couples see through the façade that marriage equality equates homosexual and heterosexual couples when it comes to other familial issues, particularly parental rights. There is a distrust of marriage in this community that at times, leads to a rejection of it all together (2017). Ash was also the only respondent who spoke of being brought up in a family where there was an expectation for her to marry. Her experience as a young girl and the pressure put on her demonstrates how discourse around marriage for young girls is likely to take a heteronormative form. Ellison argues that much of this discourse originates from the patriarchal and gendered roles of domination and submission that historically characterise the relationship between man and woman (2006:61).

Ash: I grew up with the idea that I'd marry a man and have lotsa kids and like to have kids I would be married. Like I remember thinking that in my head as a kid and I remember struggling with that when I like realised that I didn't just like men and then inevitably that I didn't like men at all, that I didn't wanna fall in love with them. I struggled with the idea of oh I can't marry and have kids then.

All the other respondents, even the older women, explained how there was very little pressure put on them as young girls by their immediate families to get married in the future, but Rachel stated that she felt there were expectations in place in terms of society in general. This idea also arose in my interview with Nora who spoke of her personal experience with this:

Nora: The ways it's looked at is if someone's getting married like the second you're engaged it's when are ya getting married? Or else, even when ya start going out with somebody like with me and James. We start going out a few weeks and when yis getting engaged? Then when ya get engaged, when are ya getting married? And then when ya get married, when are ya having kids. It's just one after the other.

### **5.5 Wedding Ceremonies**

Eithne and Lily both married their partners at religious wedding ceremonies despite their low levels of religious belief and practice. Both Lily and Eithne married in churches partly to satisfy the desires of their families, particularly their parents.

Interviewer: So why did you and your husband decide to marry in a church?

Eithne: Emm well partly his uncle is a priest and em he'd done the weddings for other members of the family so because of how much religion meant to his parents and my mother (laughs) we kinda felt we weren't strictly adversed to having a church wedding so we were happy enough to go ahead but I did feel a bit slightly hypocritical ya know because I wasn't practicing at the time.

Eithne married in the year 1988, and so it is interesting that Rachel, one of the youngest respondents, also explained that she believes her desire to marry in a church in the future may be to satisfy her family rather than herself. Despite the generational difference, familial expectation

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persists. This corresponds with Vignoli and Salvini's research which argues that rituals associated with Catholicism, like marrying in a church, act predominantly as a continuation of tradition for people, or are done to satisfy wider societal expectations (2014:1083-1084).

The actual church building itself was of particular significance for Lily and her husband. Both are members of a gospel choir and the church in which they married was also the place in which they met and rehearsed each week. The gospel choir performed the music at their wedding and for Lily, this was one of the reasons why she described her wedding day as "perfect and so personal". Lily's personal connection to this church can be analysed using Smart's material/artistic dimension of religious belief and practice. Smart noted that religions typically express themselves in material creations which signify importance in varying ways, for example, being a marker of identity or familiarity (1996:11). Classical sociologist Emile Durkheim's writings also acknowledge the church building as key for the carrying out of religious rituals due to the connection it provides between the individual and the collective (Ritzer 2014:97-99).

Nora was married by a wedding solemniser. She and her husband were offered suggestions for what their wedding ceremony would be composed of but ultimately had the final say over the entire thing. Ann, who is engaged, is planning on marrying her husband in a civil ceremony.

Ann: we're together so long and I'm almost fifty. There was no way I was doing the big church wedding thing. We just wanted something quiet and kinda personal so we went for the registry office.

Nora: It was what, twenty minutes long as opposed to the like hour and a half a church wedding malarch.

Ann's choice of a secular ceremony can be analysed as a push back against the "big wedding" which she views as interlinked with a church wedding. Although it can be argued that Nora seems

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to have chosen her ceremony with this partially in mind too, the amount of guests at her wedding reception – 120 – demonstrates that this is not so clear cut. Nora’s reluctance to have a long wedding ceremony can be analysed in terms of modernization of social ties theory, which argues that one way in which society is becoming more modern is through the increasingly fast-paced nature of people’s ordinary daily lives. The solemnising ceremony that Nora had and the civil ceremony that Ann is planning to marry through are examples of the large variety of wedding ceremonies available for couples to choose from in the modern world. This is quite a recent phenomenon as only a few decades ago, the choices available for Eithne, for instance, were quite limited.

### **5.6 Weddings and Consumption**

The movement away from big church weddings examined above is also related to consumption. There is a massive contrast, for example, between the amount of money that Lily spent on her entire church wedding and honeymoon, and the amount that Ann has budgeted for her wedding day. Lily spent €20,000 whereas Ann and her partner plan on spending just over €1,000. The women seem to regard secular ceremonies as the cheaper alternative. When I told Carol, for example, that the average couple spend €24,590 on their wedding and honeymoon ([www.mrs2be.ie](http://www.mrs2be.ie)), she replied saying that she would not be able to afford that and so will possibly be marrying in a registry office instead of a church. Yet, secular does not always mean cheaper; Nora spent €27,000 on her wedding and honeymoon.

The views of my respondents can be compared to Carter and Duncan’s discovery that many of the couples they studied refused to buy into “empty consumerism” (2016). Interestingly, it was my youngest respondents who grew up in a consumerism-saturated society that appeared to be the most appalled after learning of the above figure, terming it as “shocking” (Sarah) and “insane” (Ash). The wedding reception venue is one of the largest parts of a couple’s budget and

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the expense can range massively depending on the number of wedding guests. Wedding guests are an interesting variable because they can represent the economic and social capital of a couple. A “big wedding” demonstrates financial stability and affluence (Cherlin 2004:857) and a large number of guests can indicate high levels of social capital.

Carter and Duncan identified a tension for brides between the allure of a unique, individualized wedding, and the desire to have a traditional wedding. They argued that many brides go through a process of merging these two conflicting desires, resulting in what they term “re-traditionalization” (2016). Rachel, when speaking about getting married in the future, expressed a desire to merge a non-traditional bridal style with a traditional-type venue:

Rachel: personally I wouldn't have a big dress or a big train or anything like that but the reception like the venue and all that would probably be big, be fancy and nice.

When telling me about her choice of wedding dress, Nora engaged with a discourse associated with stereotypical traditional femininity and consumerism:

Nora: being a woman when you see a dress you're like I have to have it and then ya see the price tag and you're like crap.

Nora: I tried it on and I was like yeah I have to, I'm sorry, I know, I know it's a bit expensive but I have to. It was just perfect.

Although the wedding industry is currently booming in Ireland, with numerous wedding fairs and workshops, and hundreds of hairdressers, make-up artists, stylists, photographers, and hoteliers depending on brides particularly as their main clients, my respondents failed to be tricked into what Carol, for instance, termed as “a disgrace”. They were aware of the materialistic side of weddings and most of them reported that the most important part of a wedding day is not the



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material aspects of it, but being around one's family and friends. When Sarah was asked if she believed that the materialistic elements of religious wedding ceremonies like the bride's dress tend to overshadow the religious aspects, she responded with a yes.

Sarah: Everybody is more focused on the dress and the flowers and the songs and where you're going for the afters rather than the actual mass like.

When I asked Ann the same question about her sister's wedding, she responded the opposite way, stating that attention was still paid to the religious aspects of the ceremony because "the bride wasn't overly, she had a nice simple dress". Interestingly, whether or not the religious aspects are visible for the wedding guests seems to depend on materialistic aspects.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

This thesis has offered a detailed exploration of several Irish women's experiences and perceptions of the role of Catholicism within the social institution of marriage. Although an overwhelming amount of Ireland's population continue to identify as Catholic and participate in Catholic practices and lifecycle rituals, this thesis has provided an opportunity for readers to delve into the words of Irish women themselves. It gives an insight into how a small sample of mainly Dublin-based women of varying ages describe their own religious identities, and if and how they believe this connects to their attitudes towards and experiences of marriage. Choosing women as participants was especially important for me as typically women are regarded as more religious than men, and brides are most associated with the planning of weddings.

Secularization and modernization theory, Catholic habitus and lifecycle ritual theory are all key concepts when it comes to the sociology of religion, and they have been drawn upon throughout this thesis, in order to link the micro-structures of women's lives to macro-structures. The literature review makes use of a wide variety of contemporary research on a range of topics, in

order to situate my research in its wider context. My findings aligned with a lot of previous research, particularly in terms of women's views on secular and religious wedding ceremonies and their opinions regarding consumptive bridal practices.

My main findings suggest that there are discrepancies present between my participants' identification with the Catholic faith and their acceptance of its core teachings. Religious socialization persists, and plays a role, along with familial and societal expectation, in the women's choice of wedding ceremony. My findings did not yield too much evidence of a generational gap in opinions, but due to their confident opposition towards church teachings and reflectiveness when it came to the idea of marriage and its meaning, the younger women's perceptions seem to be more liberal than their older counterparts. Despite the prominence of the wedding industry within all forms of media, all the women spoke out against the materialistic side of it, which questions the commonplace idea that women, more than men, are avid consumers and fail to realise the detrimental effects of consumptive practices. My respondents recognised the impact of consumerism on the religiosity of Catholic wedding ceremonies, noticing that it seems to negatively affect it. From my tiny snapshot of this extremely complex area of social life, I can state that for my participants, the role that religion plays within marriages and weddings ceremonies is becoming less and less significant, and even Catholic women's marriages are becoming increasingly secular.

There is no doubt that with greater time and resources, a more in-depth, larger research project can be conducted with my research questions in mind. Other ideas that could inspire further research are as follows: an investigation of the same research question with male participants; a deeper study of the pressure to marry felt by lesbian women in Ireland following the marriage referendum, and how they negotiate their own wedding style in what is a largely heteronormative industry; seeing whether age is an important factor when it comes to Catholic women's choice of wedding ceremony. This thesis has provided what I hope is an interesting and,

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at some level, fresh insight into this research topic. With both religion and marriage continuing to be two of the most significant and visible social institutions in contemporary times, the scope and potentiality of their interaction for research is endless.

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